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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 MANILA 001613

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SENSITIVE

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TAGS: PGOV PHUM RP

SUBJECT: PHILIPPINE ELECTION-RELATED VIOLENCE

Ref: A. MANILA 1544

- 1B. MANILA 1521
- 1C. MANILA 1494
- 1D. MANILA 1467
- 1E. MANILA 1215
- 1F. MANILA 1073

SUMMARY AND COMMENT

11. (SBU) 2007 election-related violence has taken the lives of local candidates, political supporters, members of the police and military, election workers, and by-standers. While the police privately claimed to have ruled out all but 51 campaign-era killings as politically motivated, media and other sources have reported at least 126 election-related deaths, with 21 in the final week and 11 on Election Day. Both the Commission on Elections (COMELEC) and the Philippine National Police (PNP) nonetheless assessed that - with some isolated incidents -- the nationwide elections were "relatively peaceful" and have predicted the violence will now subside. President Arroyo has ordered the PNP, the Armed Forces of the Philippines, and the Department of Justice to cooperate and promptly to file cases against the perpetrators.

12. (SBU) Whatever the exact number, the tragic deaths and injuries are reflective of larger problems within the Philippines: inadequate enforcement even of existing restrictions on guns (during the campaign period, new permits were theoretically required for each gun-carrier); widespread availability of weapons; a "culture of impunity" that makes murder -- for any reason -- relatively risk-free; under-funded and under-trained law enforcement agencies; reluctance of witnesses to offer testimony for fear of retaliation due to an inadequate witness protection program; and, a weak and slow-working judicial system. In our ongoing campaign against unlawful killings, the USG is actively seeking to provide additional assistance to help the Philippines address these myriad problems.

POLITICAL DEATHS

13. (U) Between December 2006 and May 2007, media accounts and NGO sources have reported at least 126 people killed and 149 injured in 217 election-related incidents nationwide. Sixty were politicians seeking reelection or new candidates; fifteen were policemen providing security to politicians; and eight were soldiers. The rest were supporters or civilians, including election workers who died in an arson-related fire of a polling center. Among the three main regions, Luzon and Mindanao accounted for a majority of the incidents.

14. (SBU) While Philippine National Police (PNP) statistics as of May 9 already listed 99 election-related killings, on May 17 PNP shared with Embassy privately a new compilation revising its count

down to only 51 such political killings in this campaign season. PNP officials explained that further investigations had indicated non-political motives in all other cases. PNP has not yet made its revised version public.

¶5. (U) Both the COMELEC and PNP publicly declared this year's elections "relatively peaceful," with casualties "significantly lower" than during the 2004 election campaign, when there were 149 deaths in 249 incidents. In the 2001 mid-term elections, there were reportedly 111 deaths in 269 incidents. Officials have predicted that the violence will subside within a week.

GOVERNMENT RESPONSE

¶6. (U) President Arroyo on April 30 called on the military to reinforce the police in stopping the violence and "move forcefully against those using threats or intimidation for partisan politics." The President also called on security officials to identify and dismantle all "private armies," often associated with local political leaders. Armed Forces Chief Hermogenes Esperon, at the behest of COMELEC, ordered the immediate deployment of troops in areas of concern and the installation of more checkpoints nationwide. A total of 115,000 policemen and 20,000 members of the Philippine army were deployed to "hotspots" to curb the violence.

¶7. (U) PNP Chief Oscar Calderon directed police commanders at all levels to adopt pro-active measures, such as increased police visibility and round-the-clock checkpoints, especially in "critical" areas. PNP claimed to have confiscated 1,820 firearms, 182 explosives, and more than 302 deadly weapons have since the start of the election period in January. Police reportedly killed some 30 suspects while arresting another 1,969 in the confiscation process.

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PNP claimed also to have dismantled 52 of 90 "known private armies."

¶8. (U) President Arroyo also ordered the PNP, AFP, and the Department of Justice to "harness their investigative and legal resources" in addressing election-related violence as well as other unlawful killings, utilizing the assistance from foreign partners as possible. The President also urged prompt filing of cases against perpetrators.

SOME CASE STUDIES DURING CAMPAIGNING . . .

¶9. (U) The earliest known incident occurred on December 16, when Abra Congressman Luis Bersamin was gunned down in front of a church in Manila after attending a wedding. Abra Governor Vicente Valera, expected to vie for Bersamin's seat, was implicated in the killing but denied involvement. Two weeks later, in Tapaz town, Capiz Province, Vice Mayor Victor Gardose, Gardose's bodyguard, and a village chief were fatally shot while about to attend a religious festival event. Gardose had announced his intention to seek the town mayoral seat.

¶10. (U) A mayoral candidate from Datu Paglas town, North Cotabato Province, his wife, and bodyguard were injured while his driver was killed in an ambush while en route to a nearby town in Sultan Kudarat on March 15.

¶11. (U) On April 27 in Nueva Ecija, a shootout between security guards for Congressman Rodolfo Antonino, who was running for reelection, and police detailed to protect challenger Antonio Esquivel left Esquivel and one other dead, along with 12 wounded at an election rally. Esquivel's death prompted the deployment of 1,000 troops in the province. Shortly before the incident, the Court of Appeals had ordered Esquivel's arrest for the killing of a village chief in 1994. (Note: The province, a traditional election hotspot, has been under the control of the Joson political dynasty for five decades. Two Joson family members were convicted for murdering a political rival in 1995 but obtained presidential

pardons and are back in power. End Note.)

¶12. (U) On April 28 in Pangasinan Province, San Carlos City Mayor Julian Resuello was shot dead by two men who posed as his supporters as he made his way through a crowd. A suspect is now in police custody. Resuello and his son, currently vice mayor, had planned to switch seats. A younger son took over the mayoral candidacy.

¶13. (U) At a political rally on April 29 in General Nakar town, Quezon Province, a political leader was shot after introducing the incumbent mayor to the crowd. The incident happened hours after five people were killed, including two campaign supporters of a mayoral candidate, in a shootout in a cockfighting arena in Sariaya town of the same province.

¶14. (U) On May 2, a mayoral candidate in Santa Fe town in Cebu Province was gunned down in front of the COMELEC office after attending a disqualification hearing.

¶15. (U) On May 4, in Abra Province -- another traditional election hotspot -- six relatives of Congressional candidate and outgoing Lagayan town mayor Cecilia Luna were killed and three other seriously wounded when her vehicle was attacked. Luna, who was not in the car, blamed incumbent Governor Valera for the killings. On the same day, a shootout occurred between troops in civilian clothes and bodyguards of Bocaue town (Bulacan Province) mayoral aspirant Jon-jon Villanueva, son of prominent evangelist leader "Brother Eddie." The shootout, which left one soldier dead, erupted when Villanueva's bodyguards accosted the soldiers for tearing down opposition campaign posters.

¶16. (U) On May 10, a fifteen-man police contingent assigned to Mindoro Occidental Governor Josephine Sato was ambushed by alleged communist rebels in San Jose town. They were securing the road in preparation for the governor's campaign sortie when a landmine exploded and about 30 suspected NPA members opened fire. The attack left five policemen dead and six others wounded. (Note: Sato has declared a "total war" against the insurgency and survived two attempts against her life in 2004. End Note.) On the same day, in Compostela Valley Province, a gubernatorial candidate was shot dead and his daughter wounded by men who came to his house to distribute campaign leaflets.

. . . AND ON ELECTION DAY

¶17. (U) In what Education Secretary Jesli Lapus condemned as a "wretched act," arson at a school serving as a polling precinct in

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remote Taysan town, Batangas Province killed two people and injured at least five others. The police suspected the New People's Army of an effort to disrupt the elections; others have speculated that the intent was to destroy ballot boxes unfavorable to a certain candidate.

¶18. (U) In Pio Corpuz town, Masbate Province, unidentified gunmen killed two campaign leaders for a mayoral candidate before the polls opened. In another Masbate town, a mayoral candidate's brother was killed while serving as poll watcher. In Abra Province, a village chairman was shot dead before dawn in Bucay town, but his alleged killer was arrested shortly after the killing. In Negros Occidental, a political supporter of a mayoral candidate was killed in front of his home upon returning from a meeting.

¶19. (U) In Mindanao, an alleged "flying voter" was killed and another wounded in Marawi City. He was among 70 reportedly brought from neighboring Iligan City to vote under fictitious names for a certain candidate in exchange for P1,000 (21 USD). In Basilan, armed men fired at a polling center, killing the nephews of Sumisip mayor Hajarun Jamiri, who was in the precinct to cast his vote.

¶20. (U) A day after the elections, some 100 suspected communist rebels attacked and killed eight soldiers based in Manabo town in Abra Province. The soldiers were deployed to the area as route

security for the transfer of election results from polling precincts to the town center for the canvassing process. On May 16, unidentified gunmen killed a mayoral candidate and his son in Malita town, Davao del Sur. Prior to his death, the son had complained to local media about the dirty tactics employed by his father's opponent. On the same day, a winning incumbent councilor in Polomolok town, South Cotabato, was shot at close range while manning his store, and remains in critical condition.

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